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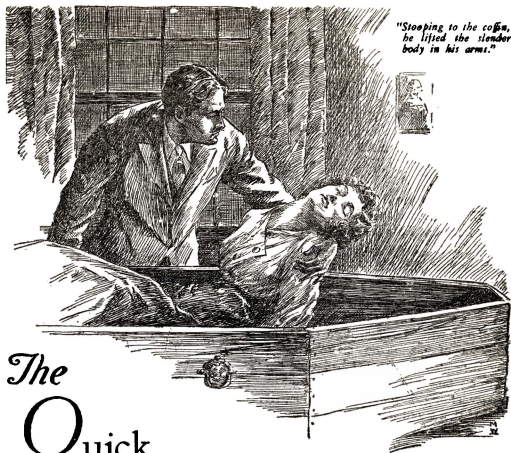
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"Stooping to the coffin,
he lifted the slender
body in his arms."

The Quick and the Dead

By VINCENT STARRETT

*An ironic yet intensely human story of a grief-stricken poet, and a
body that moved in its coffin*

LOOKING with melancholy satisfaction upon his reflected image in the glass, Louis Lacenaire completely realized that seldom had he appeared to greater advantage. As for the last time he imperceptibly adjusted the knot of his gray silk cravat, with its single line of horizontal black, he thought with a pang how happy his dear Louise would have been to see him as he looked upon this morning of her funeral. Then with

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a little sigh he turned to the door and ran lightly down the stairs.

At the cemetery, as the clods of earth thudded with solemn import upon the coffin, he grasped the arm of his companion and whispered, "I can not bear it!"

"I know, I know," murmured Hypolite Allard, and together they left the burying-ground.

The sun shone brilliantly above the

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roofs of Paris in the distance; in the suburbs the dust of puffballs filled the air. But sadly the two friends trod the pavements, thinking of her whom they had left behind. Incomparable Louise!

"My dear friend, how you must suffer!" said Hypolite Allard. "My heart bleeds with your own. She was so exquisite and dear."

"There was none like her in the world," cried Lacenaire, despairingly. "I could not stay until the end, Hypolite. You do not blame me?"

"Blame you, my dear Louis? I marvel at the restraint that held you until it did."

The bereaved lover pressed his companion's arm. "For a time I was dazed," he explained. "I experienced that dim sensation of looking on, disembodied—you understand?—at what had gone beyond my power to suffer. Then, suddenly, something snapped within me; it seemed that a veil was snatched from my eyes, so that I saw clearly the desecration that was going forward. That lovely body that was being laid away in the earth! Those dreadful clods! You understand?"

"Perfectly, my friend. It was indeed terrible. Those clods fell also upon my own heart. They were like the beats of a dreadful drum. But you must not distress yourself too greatly or too long. It is not fair to yourself, Louis. I grieve to see you so broken by this sorrow. And there is still your work!"

"My work!" gestured the poet. "It will never be the same," he added with determined pessimism. "It was for her I wrote my finest sonnets. Her inspiration was in my greatest lines. *'The monster Death that cuckolds lovers all!'* You remember, Hypolite, how happy I was the day I wrote that final line? How could I know that it was prophetic! Yesterday, Hypolite, I went to her rooms. The dear

little Claire was still there, in charge; yet everything was different. The furniture seemed to have been moved about; I felt that I was in a different place. It was like an apartment arranged for guests. You know? The little Claire was kind and sympathetic, but my dear Louise was gone. I knew that she would never be there again."

His companion nodded. "I know the emotion," he said. "I felt it once in my own place. It had been changed about for an amateur rehearsal. Dubronet was there. You remember him? He had been cast as a musketeer. He looked like a wax-works D'Artagnan. Marie was mad about him. But the little Claire is always kind and sympathetic. How she, too, must miss our dear Louise!"

"She was so exquisitely simple in her white frock," said Lacenaire. "She had refused to go into mourning. Louise would not have liked it, she said; and it was true. There were tears in her eyes as she embraced me. Her sympathy was very comforting."

"She is very sweet and good," agreed Hypolite Allard, understandingly. "May it not be, Louis, that through her association with your Louise, she is the one to ease the wound that you have suffered?"

But Louis Lacenaire smiled wanly and shook his head.

"It can never be assuaged," he answered bravely. "It was an affectionate thought, Hypolite, my friend, but do not think of it again, I beg of you. There can never be another to take the place that Louise has left vacant."

"I understand," said Hypolite Allard, as again he pressed his friend's arms. "It shall be as you say. Yet I should be happy to say something to cheer you, were it possible. But look, Louis, to the left—between the treetops—where the little window looks out beneath the ga-

bles, framed in vines. It is a picture for an artist. There is the very essence of romance in such vignettes. Do you not feel it? What may not those bordering vines conceal from us? A face piquant and charming perhaps, smiling an invitation. One looks to see a white arm extended, and slender fingers that gently sway a kerchief or a scarf."

For an instant the poet turned and gazed, then shrugged without emotion.

"A pretty fancy, Hypolite," he conceded, "but you are wrong. Were we to approach more closely, doubtless we should see the charming creature who dwells behind your vines. I can describe her for you without a glance. She is fat and horrible, with hair like the bristles of a pig. Her teeth protrude, and her ankles are so thick that they might be mistaken for the arms of trees. Do not waste your talents upon the country, my friend. The white arms and slender fingers have long ago fled to the apartments of the city."

He sighed deeply and, swinging his cane, resumed his sober stride.

A BRIGHT-EYED dog, diminutive and shaggy, ran out of a gateway as they paused, and approached squirming happily in obedience to the poet's finger-snap. "Good fellow," said Lacenaire, with reckless disregard of the animal's sex. He stooped to fondle its head, while the ecstatic puppy wagged joyously everything behind its ears. "What sorrows would you have to tell us, little dog, if you could talk? See, Hypolite, how happy a little kindness makes him. It is so with us, too. Ah, how much trouble is caused by hardening of the heart!"

"And by softening of the brain," added Allard, pulling the puppy's ears. "Have you heard, Louis, of Chinette's latest madness? She has had her dog's ears pierced for ear-rings. There, there, what a nice puppy it is!"

"Atrocious!" said the poet, rising to his feet to dust his knees. "Louise was kindness itself to animals. I do not yet fully appreciate what I have lost. There can never be another like her."

"Never!" agreed Hypolite Allard. "For you, Louis, she was the perfect woman. She was unique. Had it not been for your wife——"

"I should have married her!" declared Lacenaire with conviction. "We were intended for each other. Yes, even marriage with her would have been sweet and tender. Of how many women can that be said, Hypolite?"

"Few indeed," sighed Hypolite Allard. "It is as you say, Louis. She was a paragon of women. But see, we approach the city. I trust that we are to lunch together?"

The poet paused and laid his hands upon the shoulders of his friend, so that they looked deeply into each other's eyes. "No, my friend," he said. "I thank you, but for a time I feel that I must be alone. You will not misunderstand? I have much to think about. Indeed, I do not feel that I could eat. There is something abhorrent to me in the thought of food. Leave me, dear friend, now that we have reached the Boulevard. Enjoy your own luncheon greatly, without me. I shall see you again. I am just going to walk and walk and walk, thinking always of my dear Louise."

"I understand," said Hypolite Allard, answering his friend's affectionate pressure. Smiling, he added: "Be careful, Louis, that your walk does not take you toward home! The little ones might recognize you."

"Villain!" smiled Louis Lacenaire. "To remind me of that! But do not fear. I have not been home since Louise was taken from me. I am thought to be walking, near Tours."

"Farewell, then, old fellow, and take care of yourself. I shall worry until I see you again."

"Farewell, Hypolite," said the poet sadly. "Do not worry. If I am for ever bereaved, I am at least no coward. I shall do nothing terrible and final. We shall meet again. God bless you, my friend!"

They embraced and parted. Somewhere a clock struck twelve. The heat of the sun had become oppressive. A taxicab rattled by, bound for the city. Both turned and looked after it wistfully. Then both waved determined farewells.

As his stride lengthened, Allard drew a long breath. "Poor Louis!" he muttered. "I am afraid this has hit him pretty hard. It is a loss, of course. Such a mistress as Louise is not to be found in every street. But he is too overwhelmed. It is not good to become so attached to a woman. Ah, these faithful lovers! I should have thought that little Claire—"

He sighed profoundly and decided that the wine was better at Pepin's.

But to Lacenaire it seemed that the dark ages had returned, and that he was groping through them with a tallow candle. Nothing now could avail to comfort him. Well, there was, of course, his work, as Allard had pointed out. That, at least, was a debt he owed to the world, and it would be paid. But it could not minimize nor dull his anguish. Louise, Louise! Critics now would note the change that had occurred in his verse. He would sing his sorrow like another Dante to another Beatrice, like another Petrarch to another Laura. No lady had been lovelier than his. He would sit down in the waters of calamity and smile bravely at fate. In all the world there was no woman left for him; but never would the world forget the woman he had loved and who had died.

He strolled aimlessly onward toward

the bustle of the city. And suddenly he realized that he was hungry. It was a shocking situation. It was almost a betrayal of Louise. He supposed, however, that even bereaved lovers could not deny the functions of nature. The single taxicab that had passed him seemed to have been the last of its race. A pretty milliner's apprentice, noting the restless eyes and pale face, presented her admirable teeth for his inspection. He smiled sorrowfully, pityingly, and passed on. Other persons began to pass him, singly and in pairs. Then there were knots, and at length the throngs of the city engulfed him. Attracted by his immaculate image in the shop windows that he passed, he stopped at length and examined his features in the dim mirror that offered. Yes, he was suffering; there was no doubt about it. He was suffering the torments of the unshriven. His appearance was more than haggard; it was tragic. Louise, Louise!

UNDER the trees of Montmartre he encountered a small and attractive restaurant, with the tables set outdoors. He captured an advantageous chair and called for the bill of fare and pen and ink. While he waited, he looked upward at the sky. It was very blue, blue as a blue butterfly. Like a butterfly, it swam in and out among the roofs and chimneys. The streets swam in the sun. And yet Louise was dead. His little sweetheart was dead. What suffering! And yet—had not her death enriched him? And, if this were true, what matter how he suffered?

The bill of fare, when it arrived, had been reduced by expunging pencil marks to a few dishes, rendered doubly uninviting by this distinction of survival, but he ordered recklessly and managed to consume what was set before him without discomfort. An idea for a sonnet was

growing in his mind. . . . When we are told that we are loved for our bodies, and not for our minds, he thought, we need no consolation, for we are delighted. We feel that we are loved for ourselves. But when we are told that we are loved for our minds, we are hurt, for we understand that we are loved for something that is extrinsic and, in the last analysis, of trivial merit.

As he placed the point of his pen against the paper, a girl passed the café who looked so much like the little Claire that he was startled. But Claire was miles away. She had distinctly told him that she would not attend the funeral. She did not like funerals, and she preferred to remember his dear Louise as she had known her in life. What happy chance was this that had brought the little Claire to him when he was most in need of comfort?

Hastily paying his bill, he stuffed the unwritten sonnet into his pocket and sallied forth. A rapid walk of half a block, however, convinced him of his mistake. The little blond creature was not Claire at all, but merely a charming child who resembled Claire. A delightful, fairy-like little trick, as sweet and pure as his own Louise. She carried a package under her arm, and no doubt had been out upon an errand. Probably she lived in the neighborhood, not far away. Her voice, he imagined, was like the chime of a silver bell: Louise's very voice. Dear child, she was herself a poem, stirring more hearts by her beauty than ever faltered at a sonnet.

But what was this? A tall ruffian was sauntering close behind her. Perhaps she was in danger of insult. He was an evil-looking scoundrel with his lopsided smile. Disguised as a porter, he was undoubtedly a villain of the deepest dye.

"I shall follow her a little way," mur-

mured Lacenaire, sympathetically. "She may never know that she has been protected; but if she should have need of help, it will be well that I should be on hand."

He timed his own saunter to the stride of the desperado who looked like a porter, and with relief saw him turn off at the next thoroughfare. The little maid continued straight ahead, without a glance. It was Lacenaire's own way, as it happened. Straight ahead is ever the brave way when one is in doubt. He strolled quietly along some yards behind, pleased by the extraordinary chance that had thrown so perfect a poem into his path upon a day so fraught with gloom. The turn of her ankle was exquisite and the carriage of her dainty head was pert and charming. Her scrubby little jacket and unevenly hung skirt might have clothed a princess; her hat was such a hat as a happy woman might wear.

Once as she paused and for some purpose removed one of her gloves, the poet noted, as often he had noted before, the ravishing effect of white hands coming swiftly out of black swathings. Not wishing to frighten her by his proximity, he paused also at the moment, and gravely adjusted his cuffs before a tobacconist's doorstep.

Apparently she lived in the Rue Robert, which would be astounding. Dubronet, himself, none other, lived in the Rue Robert. Allard had even mentioned the man upon the walk from the cemetery. An amazing coincidence. It might even be that she lived in Dubronet's own building. How laughable if she should prove to be his sister! Yes, she was indeed turning into the Rue Robert.

TO LACENAIRE it seemed that all the taxicabs of Paris contrived to be present at that moment, and to rush at him from every direction as he attempted

to cross the street. A short time ago there had been none; he had looked for one in vain. Now they came in families! One red one he sidestepped by an inch. The little maid was safely across. She was vanishing.

"You abominable insect!" said Lacenaire, furiously. "You insufferable toad!"

Claiming to have information about the poet's mother, the driver cast it impartially abroad. His words were numerous and bitter.

"You indescribable blue noun!" screamed Lacenaire from the curb. "If only I had time to destroy you!"

But already too much time had been wasted. For just an instant the little maid had been clearly in his vision, and in the next she had vanished. Just a flirt of the adorable ankle as she had entered a doorway; then nothing.

"And yet," fumed Lacenaire, countermarching in the street, "it must have been one of two. It is certainly either No. 18 or No. 20. . . . Dubronet is at 22. Could it have been No. 22?"

Well, well, the little maid was now safely within doors, and after all what difference did it make? She was at home, now, and happy, as was right and proper. Now that Louise was gone, what dwelling could be home to the poet Lacenaire? This child and Dubronet were mere neighbors, of course. Perhaps they had never seen each other. That was often the way of things in the city.

"At any rate," said the poet Lacenaire, aloud, "now that I am here I shall look in on Dubronet. It is too bad that we have never exchanged visits. He is an excellent fellow. Allard is prejudiced because of Marie."

Dubronet, he reflected, had been married three times, and in other respects had proved himself no mere spectator of

life. He would be able to sympathize with his friend's loss. It might perhaps be unwise to mention the little maid in the neighboring building; there was no necessity for placing her in peril of Dubronet's gallantries, which were well known. It was possible, of course, that Dubronet would himself speak of her.

"I have a strange premonition of happiness," murmured Lacenaire, "of happiness touched with sorrow. It is rarely that one sees a child so innocent and happy, and yet so attractive. She interests me deeply. It is because she reminds me so much of my dear Louise. How odd that I should have mistaken her for little Claire! She is a great deal more like Louise. And yet, as I think of it, there was much in Claire and in Louise that was alike."

HE ENTERED the doorway of No. 22 and viewed with distaste the long dark stairway that stretched before him. Dubronet was up four floors, at least; perhaps five. A ridiculous precaution! With a sigh he began slowly to mount the stairs, but at the first landing he stopped to listen. There was some one coming down. Perhaps it was Dubronet himself. But no, there were several persons descending. They came slowly, and with a vast puffing and brushing of their bodies against the walls. Lacenaire strained his eyes upward in the gloom of the staircase, but the bend of the flight above intervened to obstruct his view. Annoyed, he waited on his landing until they were close at hand. Then, startled, he shrank back and stared.

Three men, bulking hugely in the dim light, were rounding the turn, carrying something heavy between them. It was a pine coffin. No need of its sinister size and shape to tell him that. He had sensed it at once. The foremost pair was

descending backward with heavy breathing.

What an encounter! Coming directly from the cemetery, where he had buried his beloved, to seek sympathy at the hands of a friend, now to be so rudely reminded of his loss on this dim stairway! Anger filled him, and a sense of injury. No other time could have been chosen for this removal; they must wait until he had entered the house unwitting. Some stupid laborer had died, and now he was to be buried.

"Steady there!" called the foremost carriers in unison, to the single toiler in the rear. "There is some one coming up. Get back or go past us, can't you?" added one of the men, peering sharply at the poet in the corner.

The cortège had stopped. The first pair had brushed by and the other man had yet to pass. The coffin lay immediately beneath the eyes of the bereaved lover.

"Go on, you idiots," he said indignantly. "Do you suppose I want to sit down on it?"

Then suddenly something stirred in the silence that caused his heart for a moment to become ice; a sound from within the coffin.

"My God!" said Lacenaire, in a hollow voice. "What have you there? It is moving!"

He sprang back as he spoke, his eyes fixed upon the box, ready for flight.

"It is a young girl," answered the spokesman, respectfully, not knowing with whom he had to deal. "She is dead of heart-failure. We are taking her to the undertaker's."

"A young girl!" cried Lacenaire, appalled. "But she is *not* dead! I heard her move—just now—inside the box!"

The man shrugged and took a firmer hold upon his burden. "Be sure that she is quite dead," he answered, good-humor-

edly. "Otherwise, we should not be taking her away. If you are her lover——"

"A young girl!" shrieked Lacenaire. "You dolts, I tell you I heard her move inside the coffin. I am not her lover, you fools! I do not know her. You are burying her alive!" Angrily he concluded: "Do you think I am crazy? I tell you she is not dead. I order you to take her back. Do you want me to call the police?"

Grumbling, the men began a retreat before this determination. "As you say, master," said the spokesman, "but it is funny that *we* heard nothing. She has been dead for hours. Since you insist, you shall see for yourself."

The procession, having reversed itself, moved slowly upward, with Lacenaire a few steps behind. Amazement and curiosity now had taken the place of indignation in his mind.

"Hurry, you snails," he ordered feverishly; and instantly asked, "What is her name? Where does she live? Where are her people?"

"Her name is Chardon," answered the man who had spoken. "She lives up another floor, where we found her. Her people, we were told, are dead. She died suddenly, this morning. A neighbor told us to come and take her away."

"Good God!" cried the poet, reverently. "That such things can happen! Was there no doctor called?"

"I am sorry, master, but I do not know," answered the carrier. "We were told that her furniture would pay for her burial."

"Her furniture!" sobbed Lacenaire. He bounded past them at the indicated number and flung open the door. It was a front room, and the gay sunlight of early afternoon fell outward across the sill to illumine the spectacle.

When the pine boards had been wrenched away, they looked down upon

the body of the girl who lay within the coffin. She was young and slender, and she was garbed as she had fallen, in a neat house-dress of black and yellow. Her face was thin and pale, and the eyes were closed. With a cry of grief, Lacenaire snatched a small mirror from the wall and bent down to hold it to her mouth.

"Why, she is beautiful!" he said, passing the glass across the too-red lips. "It is an old trick, and perhaps it will not work; but it is all I can think of."

But the mirror was unnecessary, for the girl was definitely stirring in her coffin, waking as if from a long sleep.

"You must get a doctor at once," ordered the poet, happily. "Run quickly, one of you, and bring back the nearest you can find. This girl is going to live!"

Stooping to the coffin, as the man hurried off, he lifted the slender body in his arms and carried it to a sofa. Then very gently he began to chafe the hands and feet, looking eagerly all the time upon the closed eyelids, awaiting the moment when they would open again. . . . Would they be brown or blue, he wondered; and what could be her name? She was adorable!

THE doctor, when with astonishing rapidity he had been located and convoyed to the scene, was more successful in his ministrations, and so it happened that when the eyes first opened it was upon his bearded lips that they gazed.

The physician was enthusiastic. "Fine! Fine!" he exclaimed, jubilantly, rubbing his hands together in an ecstasy. "One of the finest cases of arrested life that I have ever seen. My dear sir, I can not thank you heartily enough for this opportunity. This case will make my reputation."

"I am very glad to hear it," said Lacenaire, with a little bow and smile. "I am myself happy to have been an instrument

in so agreeable and successful a resurrection."

"She should be grateful to us both," chuckled the physician, as he busied himself about the stove. "A few more minutes and she would have failed to return. She has no idea yet what has happened, but we shall give her some food, and then perhaps she will sleep for a time. I think the poor child must have been starving. When she wakes she must have more food, and something to drink. We must get somebody to stay with her—a nurse perhaps, since there is no family."

"Pardon," smiled Lacenaire, with a charming gesture, "but it is my intention to stay with her, myself. Should I need assistance, I have friends in the building who will be happy to render it; but I am very intelligent, and if you will tell me what is necessary, it will be sufficient."

"Her name," said the physician, "appears to be *Helène*. It is here upon this sofa cover."

"A sweet name," said the poet. "It was my sister's name. She died of a very rare disease. It would have interested you. This child is very like her. How old would you guess her to be?"

"Not a day above nineteen."

"It was my sister's very age!"

"You must be kind to her, of course," said the physician. "With your permission, I shall look in again this evening."

"I shall be *more* than kind," promised Lacenaire, grasping the other's hand.

"*Helène*," he murmured, standing beside the sofa when the doctor had gone away. "There is something in you, also, of *Claire* and of *Louise*. It is that which attracts me to you. You are adorable!"

SHE is adorable, *Hypolite*," he told his friend *Allard*, when again they met. "You must wait until you see her, my friend. There is no one like her in the world!"